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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to test the hypothesis that families of victims of child sexual abuse would evidence the cohesion versus conflict factor on the Family Environment Scale (FES), but would also display a second expressiveness versus control factor that would not be found in nonvictim families. Female college students (N=92) who had been sexually abused as children and a group of matched nonvictims (N=99) completed a battery of self-report instruments which included the FES and the Past Experiences Questionnaire. A factor analysis of the 10 FES subscales revealed four factors for nonvictims and three for victims. Expressiveness-control was not a separate factor for victims but rather combined with cohesion, conflict, independence, intellectual-cultural orientation, and active-recreational orientation to form one major factor accounting for 33% of the variance in the sample. For nonvictims, cohesion, conflict, independence, and expressiveness comprised the primary factor which accounted for 23% of the variance. The findings illustrate the extent to which family characteristics are interrelated in families of sexual abuse victims. In addition, moral-religious emphasis formed an independent factor for victims, unrelated to other family characteristics such as control and expressiveness. (NB)

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Family Environments of Childhood Sexual Abuse Victims: Dimensions of Family Functioning

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Family Environments of Childhood Sexual Abuse Victims: Dimensions of Family Functioning

Incestuous families have frequently been described in the clinical literature as enmeshed and often tightly controlled by a rigid, moralistic father (e.g., Cohen, 1983). Conflict and disorganization are also believed to characterize some incestuous families. Recent controlled studies provide some support for these views, indicating that incest families are less cohesive and adaptable than families of nonvictims (Harter, Alexander, & Neimeyer, 1988). Additionally, it appears that these characteristics may also be evident in families in which a child is abused by an unrelated person (Alexander & Lupfer, 1987). Whereas these findings demonstrate that victim families display lower levels of certain characteristics, an issue that has not been addressed empirically is whether characteristics of victim families differ in structure from those of nonvictim families.

The Family Environment Scale, which measures ten aspects of family social climate, is widely used for assessing family functioning and has recently been employed in studies of families of sexual abuse victims. Factor analytic investigations of the FES with various samples suggest two major dimensions: a bipolar, cohesion vs. conflict dimension; and a unipolar, organization-control dimension (Boake & Salmon, 1983; Fowler, 1981). It appears, however, that the factor structure varies depending on the population sampled (Oliver, May, & Handal, 1988). In the present study it was hypothesized that families of victims of child sexual abuse would evidence the commonly found cohesion vs. conflict factor but would also display a second,

expressiveness vs. control factor, that would not be found in nonvictim families. This factor could be thought to be reflective of the dominating father often described in the clinical literature who does not allow for open expression of feelings.

Method

From a sample of over 1000 female introductory psychology students, 92 were identified as having been sexually abused as a child. Ninety-nine nonvictims were matched to the victim sample on age, SES, religion, and marital status to serve as controls. For the purposes of this study, sexual abuse was defined as sexual activity involving a child under 13 with someone at least five years older or involving a child between the ages of 13-16 with someone at least ten years older.

Participants completed a battery of self-report instruments related to psychological adjustment, two of which were relevant to this study. The Past Experiences Questionnaire (PEQ) includes questions concerning demographic information, childhood sexual experiences, and other potentially traumatic events (e.g., physical abuse). Reliabilities for the PEQ have been reported elsewhere (Messner at al., 1988). In addition, participants completed the Family Environment Scale (Moos & Moos, 1981, 1986).

Results and Discussion

A factor analysis of the ten FES subscales, using the principal components method with varimax rotation and a scree criterion to decide the appropriate number of factors

to be retained, revealed four factors for nonvictims and three factors for victims (see Table 1). As predicted, different factor structures emerged for the two samples.

Expressiveness-control was not a separate factor for victims but rather combined with cohesion, conflict, independence, intellectual-cultural orientation, and active-recreational orientation to form one major factor that accounted for 33% of the variance in the sample. In contrast, for nonvictims, cohesion, conflict, independence, and expressiveness comprised the primary factor, which accounted for 23% of the variance. Three additional factors emerged for nonvictims (see Table 1), whereas only two additional factors were found for victims (see Table 1). Notably, one of these factors involved a high loading on moral-religious emphasis alone.

Perhaps the most striking aspect of these results is the extent to which family characteristics are interrelated in families of sexual abuse victims. Even cultural and recreational activities, which formed a separate factor for nonvictims, are related to the control and cohesion dimension. This finding suggests that when a family lacks cohesion and does not encourage expressiveness, it would also tend to be less active and place less emphasis on intellectual and cultural involvement. In contrast, family characteristics are much more evenly distributed across factors in families of nonabused participants. For example, a family could lack cohesion and expressiveness and be highly conflictual, but still function adequately in other areas, such as in recreational, intellectual, and cultural involvement.

A related finding is that approximately equal variance is accounted for by both groups, although there are only three victim factors, whereas four major factors emerged for the nonvictims.

Another interesting finding was that moral-religious emphasis formed an independent factor for victims, unrelated to other family characteristics such as control and expressiveness. This result conflicts with both anecdotal and controlled child sexual abuse literature, which often suggests, for example, that control is related to religiosity (perhaps in a dominating but highly religious father). However, differences in the samples employed may account for this discrepancy.

In conclusion, as noted before by authors such as Oliver et al. (1988), the factor structure of the FES appears quite sample-specific and can be influenced by such factors as age and the characteristics of the sample population. More specifically, this study has suggested that abuse status of the participants may have consequences on the emerging factor structure of the Family Environment Scale.

Table 1
Factor Loadings of Family Environment Scale Subscale

	Nonvictim Sample			
Subscale	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3	Factor 4
Cohesion	.69	.33	.38	.06
Expressiveness	.58	.48	-.26	.06
Conflict	-.83	-.02	-.23	.24
Independence	.72	-.12	-.07	.26
Achievement-Orientation	.04	.08	.09	.90
Intellectual-Cultural Orient.	.00	.78	.18	-.15
Active-Recreat. Orientation	.08	.79	.12	.29
Moral-Religious Emphasis	.12	.21	.68	-.16
Organization	.14	.15	.70	.20
Control	-.46	-.25	.65	.26
Eigenvalue	2.32	1.75	1.73	1.20
Percentage of Variance	23%	17.5%	17%	12%

	Victim Sample		
Subscale	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Cohesion	.71	.07	.54
Expressiveness	.77	-.29	.13
Conflict	-.62	-.09	-.54
Independence	.68	.03	-.35
Achievement-Orientation	.01	.81	-.23
Intellectual-Cultural Orient.	.61	.11	.07
Active-Recreational Orientation	.70	.21	-.10
Moral-Religious Emphasis	-.10	-.04	.70
Organization	.09	.71	.40
Control	-.70	.46	.03
Eigenvalue	3.33	1.55	1.46
Percentage of Variance	33%	16%	15%

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